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Reagan Distrust of the Establishment Helped Create His Troubles Over Iran

WASHINGTON INSIGHT

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WASHINGTON—Ronald Reagan's foreign policy is in deep trouble partly because too much of it is homemade.

The Iran affair is devastating not because it reveals the administration's naivete about Iranian politics or about haggling with terrorists. It is devastating because it has revealed an impatient White House that dismissed the opinions of its own expert advisers and its allies, bypassed Congress and believed it could hornswoggle the public.

Even after the fact, the administration has circled its wagons and tried to mount a public relations campaign instead of reaching out to Congress, the press and the public. Instead of acknowledging that he may have erred in the pursuit of a worthy cause, Mr. Reagan has adopted the confrontational style of his chief of staff, Donald T. Regan.

Problem Runs Deeper

But the real problem is deeper than the administration's mistakes or its attempts to explain them away. It is the Reagan inner circle's contempt for past foreign policies, the people who made them and the bureaucracies that carried them out.

Mr. Reagan set out in 1981 to change American foreign policy, not to manage it. He came to power convinced that many of the pillars of American diplomacy for the past two decades, such as arms control and the pursuit of detente with the Soviet Union, were rusted and rotting. These policies, he reasoned, had to be replaced, not just refurbished.

He spurned the experts from the mainstream of American foreign policy and even from the center of his own party, and surrounded himself with old friends from California and with the conservative ideologues who had been flocking to his banner since the Goldwater campaign of 1964.

"The administration has discredited most of the people who managed strategic policy in this country for the last 20 years," says Richard Haass, a former Reagan State Department official who now teaches at Harvard. "The president is not hearing mainstream strategic advice, so he has turned to radical ideas."

Mr. Reagan and his inner circle quickly discovered they couldn't count on the professionals at the State and Defense departments and at the Central Intelligence Agency to repent and convert to Reaganism. They also learned the frustration of trying to get the bureaucracy to agree on anything, much less do something.

"We asked the State Department for two and a half years to find somebody to talk to in Iran," says one weary White House official. "All they did was send us papers saying there wasn't anybody to talk to. We tried to get the CIA to make contacts, but all they did was fool around with a bunch of royalist ne'er-do-wells who'll never amount to anything."

Confronted by what they believed was sterile thinking, bureaucratic foot-dragging and congressional restrictions on what the administration was allowed to do, top White House aides began trying to do things themselves, using the small National Security Council staff at their disposal. The trend improved efficiency and minimized leaks (at least unfavorable ones), but it also cut the president off from much of the vast expertise at his command.

"The administration has a terrible penchant for unilateralism," says former Reagan Undersecretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger. "They look at an issue in its narrowest context and either ignore broader issues or give them the back of their hand."

The administration's secret diplomacy with Iran was devised mostly by national security advisers Robert McFarlane and John Poindexter, over the objections of (although not behind the backs of) Secretary of State George Shultz and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger.

After Congress took the CIA off the case, Mr. Reagan's policy toward Nicaragua was run for two years largely out of the White House.

Faith in the President

Before the National Security Council staff had studied the proposal, the president offered to ban all ballistic missiles, and upset America's allies and most of the bureaucracy.

But if the Reaganites don't trust the bureaucracy, the Congress, the allies, or the press, they have an abiding faith in the president's ability to manipulate the public. In the case of Iran, for example, Mr. Reagan felt no need, as a more traditional politician might have, to cultivate a political consensus before launching his startling attempt to change U.S. policy. As a result, the administration's after-the-fact claims of geopolitical motives for secret missions sound hollow.

There is, of course, nothing inherently wrong with radical ideas and nothing inherently right with the establishment. But Mr. Reagan's recent experience suggests its hard to run a revolution and a government at the same time.

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